

VZCZCXR08019
PP RUEHPA RUEHTRO
DE RUEHNK #0172/01 0621354
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 031354Z MAR 09
FM AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8176
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE
RUCNMGH/MAGHREB COLLECTIVE
RUEHAR/AMEMBASSY ACCRA 0213
RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0504
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0426
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0488
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 2031
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0835
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RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0545
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0942

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000172

SIPDIS

ACCRA FOR USAID/W

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/02/2019

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PINS](#) [PTER](#) [KDEM](#) [EAID](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: IN ARAFAT, POVERTY AND HOPELESSNESS BREED
RADICALISM

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Arafat is the largest and poorest district in the capital Nouakchott. Rapid urbanization, a large disenfranchised youth population, grinding poverty, and imported Islamist extremist ideas are a potentially volatile combination. EmbOffs met with a variety of people living and working in Arafat, including an imam, an NGO worker, the mayor, and a group of young people in order to gain a fuller picture of how radicalism takes root in this bustling area of town. End summary.

160,000 OF NOUAKCHOTT'S POOREST

¶2. (SBU) Arafat, the most populous commune in Nouakchott, is home to 160,000 of the city's poorest people. This southern suburb, surrounded by five other communes (El Mina, Riyadh, Toujounine, Dar Naim and Ksar) has, for the past two decades, received a steady flow of rural migrants displaced from their communities by drought and poverty. In a meeting with PolOff and PolAsst, World Vision National Director Esther Lehmann-Sow stressed the staggering urbanization rate -- in 1996, Arafat had less than 10,000 inhabitants. Settlers keep arriving, not only from the interior but also from other communes in Nouakchott, placing considerable pressure on Arafat's already limited resources.

SCRAMBLING FOR 1,000 OUGIYA PER DAY

¶3. (SBU) Arafat residents lack access to the most basic services. Many communities do not have roads, water or electricity, and have limited access to schools and clinics. Both World Vision's Lehman-Sow and Arafat's mayor El Hacen Ould Mohamed agree that roads and water are the most needed services as they open the way to economic development.

¶4. (SBU) According to Lehman-Sow, a family of four in Nouakchott needs at least 1,000 Ougiya (\$3.80) to eat once a day and procure their water intake. Many in Arafat, particularly single mothers, struggle to make that much.

Lehman-Sow stressed that unlike in the countryside, nothing is free in the city. Families have to pay for everything, including access to water, which can fluctuate sharply from one day to the next.

¶5. (C) Mayor Ould Mohamed reported that following the August 6 coup, many development aid projects, such as a World Bank water project, have been suspended. He stated that France is still conducting six development projects but lamented that the commune is already feeling the consequences of the "embargo" against Mauritania.

A FERTILE GROUND FOR EXTREMISM

¶6. (C) In a meeting with PolOff and PolAsst, Imam Abdallah Ould Cheikh Sid Mohamed stated that Islamic extremism was present in Arafat (though he emphasized several times that his own branch of Sufi Islam was "peaceful and tolerant"). Susceptible youth - i.e., those who were "poor, ignorant, and illiterate" - could be influenced by Mauritians who had access to "foreign financing" and preached radical ideas. Imam Mohamed stressed these groups are very well organized. He described a process whereby small shops offered food at subsidized prices, along with a dose of preaching. After 30 days of "training," youth deemed worthy of further indoctrination could be sent to Pakistan or India for additional exposure to radical ideologies. These "students" then returned to Mauritania to preach extreme ideas in the

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same poor neighborhoods, thus creating a cycle of extremism. Stating that "the pressure of money" and lure of cheaper goods was very strong in a poor neighborhood such as Arafat, Imam Mohamed said this cycle was hard to break. Moreover, the extremists did not just pose a danger to foreigners - Imam Mohamed stressed that moderate Imams like himself were possible targets as well, as they did not show a sufficient level of "zeal" that satisfied the extremists. He stated that his sister-in-law, who had joined a radical group, was trying to "convert" members of his own family. Wanting to avoid confrontation, he sent his family back to the village.

¶7. (C) Mayor Ould Mohamed also acknowledged that extremism was present in Arafat, though he said the "peaceful character of the Mauritanian people" acted as a bulwark against radicalization. Nevertheless, he stated the "international situation" led to frustration, which could help explain, but not justify, intolerance. Comment: The "international situation" he referred to presumably meant U.S. involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, and recent Israeli actions in the Gaza Strip. End comment.

¶8. (C) Sidi Mohamed Cheiguier, development consultant and director of Consulting Ingenierie Developpement, told PolOff that many moderate imams and charities felt threatened by the activities of radical groups. These groups had approached him about participating in rule of law initiatives as they were concerned about the social and political situation in Mauritania. When PolOff asked him for the names of those charities, Cheiguier said he did not feel comfortable sharing that information and invited PolOff to investigate. He stated it would be wise for the U.S. to work with those groups. He said there are currently over 1,000 mosques in Nouakchott but that the funding for most of the mosques is unknown. He stated radical foreign groups may have financed many of these mosques.

¶9. (C) World Vision director Lehmann-Sow theorized that there were several factors that led to fundamentalism and extremism in the poorer quarters of town. She said that due to a "rural mindset" of those who migrated to the city, they often clung to what they knew and was familiar. This manifested itself in a mistrust of foreigners and a rejection of foreign (particularly Western) elements. Finally,

economic pressure led some to fundamentalism, because Islamic charities provided services to families that the government could not. For example, she cited a charity that provided scholarships to children. While paying for their fees (and thus earning the family's support), the children also received a dose of extreme ideas.

YOUTH: A TIME BOMB

¶ 10. (C) All four people Emboffs met with were extremely concerned about young people in Arafat. According to Mr. Cheiguer, Mauritanian youth have suffered from the dissolution of traditional support networks. Young people are traditionally educated by the village and, particularly, by their mothers. In an urban setting, mothers are likely to work and the village structure is lacking. According to Mr. Cheiguer, young people are "left to their own devices." Limited access to schools and the lack of structured activities for young people pose a problem. Mr. Cheigher explained that without sports, community and cultural centers, young people were turning to criminal networks and radical groups for a sense of identity and support.

¶ 11. (C) World Vision director Lehmann-Sow stated she feared a social explosion as young people became increasingly resentful of income and opportunity inequalities in Nouakchott.

¶ 12. (C) PolOff and PolAsst talked to a group of seven young
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men and women who are part of Imam Mohamed's mosque. They all expressed a desire for increased economic development opportunities. The women told PolOff and PolAsst they would like the means to start a cooperative, while one young man, who was a barber, also said a micro-finance type of initiative to enable people to develop their own businesses would be very helpful.

USG ENGAGEMENT

¶ 13. (C) Imam Mohamed had very clear ideas on how the USG should provide development aid to Mauritania. Stating that funds provided to the government were often diverted or not used in a transparent manner, he argued that direct funding at the community level was the best way to produce change. "We are the ones who deal with the extremists on a daily basis, we are directly threatened by them, and we can make the most impact." He asserted that fighting extremism and terrorism through purely military means would not work; those who struggle peacefully for a more tolerant Islam must also be supported. Moreover, people who have not had direct contact with Americans often harbor fear and misconceptions about them; working at the community level would dispel some of these negative stereotypes he said. He added that a U.S. funded water project in his native village had changed the villagers' views about the U.S. and made them inclined to cooperate with U.S. objectives as long as they respected islam.

¶ 14. (C) While Imam Mohamed was receptive to possible USG assistance, the Deputy Mayor of Arafat was another story. Stating numerous times that it was necessary to respect Mauritania's sovereignty (and stating outright that he was afraid the US would send its military into Mauritania to intervene in the political crisis), he asked "Would you bring assistance to us like that which you brought to Iraq and Afghanistan? We don't need that kind of aid." He stressed the need for assistance "without conditions" and that the US should not be an "obstacle" to development. Comment: During the Deputy Mayor's more flagrant outbursts, other town council members in the room expressed open exasperation with

him, indicating that his views were not shared universally in the room. End comment.

¶15. (C) Comment: Reports of increasing radicalization in Nouakchott's slums are well founded and deserve to be further investigated. The socio-economic conditions in Arafat and other poor communes provide a fertile ground for radicalism as disenfranchized individuals are easily recruited by well-organized groups with considerable financial means. As the U.S. re-defines its policy towards Mauritania, it is prudent to focus on community level engagement. Development projects focused on roads, water and sanitation, and youth programming can go a long way. Taking in consideration the importance of religion in this society, supporting moderate imams and charities in their fight against radicalization will have a multiplying effect in our own fight against extremism. End comment.

HANKINS